CHAPTER IX

RELIGIOUS OCCASIONS AND LOCAL CUSTOMS

RAMADAN

796 785 THIS fast, which is the name of a month in the Islamic calendar, has often been described as the Moslem Lent. During Ramadan there is a complete ban on eating, drinking and smoking during the hours [805] of daylight. The Moslem day begins at sunset, and each evening during Ramadan the setting of the sun is announced by the firing of guns in various towns, the signal that eating and drinking may commence. Two meals are eaten during the night, the first as soon as possible after sunset and the second shortly before dawn. It is often the custom to break the fast with a drink of butter-milk, before proceeding to the heavy eating. After the first meal is over people in Bahrain go visiting and sit in the coffee-shops and cinemas. At the beginning of Ramadan, all through the night the town is busy with the coming and going of the people, radios and gramophones play at full blast in the coffee-shops and night is turned into day. Later in the month there is some slackening of activity, people return earlier to their homes and endeavour to get some sleep, but they are soon awakened by the drummers who go around the town before dawn waking the sleepers so that they may eat before it becomes light. Of necessity the non-Moslem follows the Islamic time-table during this month, for he is usually kept awake by the activity in the streets, and if he does succeed in getting to sleep he is soon awakened by the persistent drummers on their rounds.

According to Moslem Law eating, drinking and smoking must cease directly it is possible to discern the difference between a black and a white thread, but it is now the custom in Bahrain towns to fire guns to announce the break of day. During the day in Ramadan life moves at a slower pace than during the other months of the year, and this is especially true when Ramadan falls in the summer, for the combination of no food and drink and the heat and dampness of [691] Bahrain reduces peoples' energy. It is noticeable that there are more court cases about domestic troubles during Ramadan while the serious crimes decrease. In the evenings in this month the townsfolk go out to the gardens and sit in the shade of the trees waiting for darkness to fall. Adari is particularly popular, many fasters try to reduce their thirst by swimming lazily in the cool waters of the pool.

As with all Moslem occasions, the end of Ramadan is decided by the appearence of the new moon, about which there is usually a dispute. While the Sunni recognise the Royal Observatory at Cairo as an authority on the appearance of the moon, the Shia insist that it should be seen in Bahrain. The result has often been that the Eid has started on two different days for the two sects, and in one memorable year there were three Eid days, one for each of the two sects and a third for the Ismailis, who have their own way of reckoning dates.